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ABSTRACT

This digest focuses on the importance of learning assistance centers (LACs) to academic success and student retention. LACs differ from learning resource centers, which mainly provide and disseminate educational information. They also differ from development education offices, which give emphasis to teaching basic skills and preparing students for college-level coursework. According to this digest, LACs concentrate on: academic diagnosis, study skills, peer/professional tutoring, supplemental instruction, computer-assisted instruction (self-learning), developmental courses, faculty outreach, public relations (open to all potential students, traditional or nontraditional), staff development, referral services, counseling/advising, evaluation (student questionnaires/alumni surveys), and academic follow-up. LACs also help institutions retain students. Community colleges with primarily a nontraditional, transient population have a difficult time retaining students who feel they don't belong in college or feel no connection with the college. LACs can provide these students with a link to the college, helping build a sense of place or belonging. LACs can also help colleges become a more comprehensive student learning environment. (MKF)

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Learning Assistance Centers: Helping Students Through

By Stefanie Stern

Facilitating student success has long been a goal of American higher education. Learning Assistance Centers (LACs) assist institutions to meet this goal by providing much needed comprehensive learning assistance to meet the academic demands of all students. LACs have many different names including Student Learning Center, Academic Success Center, Learning Skills Center, Learning Laboratory and Center for Academic Development, among others. Regardless of how they are named, these centers are best understood as a campus resource that provides a variety of academic support services to students, faculty, and staff (Maxwell, 1997).

Though LACs have been linked with "developmental education", targeting the underprepared or remedial student, according to a 2000 survey of 144 colleges and universities most centers' mission statements use holistic language about helping *all* students reach their academic potential (National College Learning Center Association). LACs emphasize flexibility in assisting students along all points of their academic careers. Their offerings are designed to assist both the advanced student as well as those who need assistance with basic skills. Ultimately, LACs are dedicated to simply "helping students become successful learners" (Enright, 1997). This Digest discusses the role of LACs and how LACs differ from other campus services, emphasizing the importance of LACs in creating academic success.

LACs Differ From Learning Resource Centers and Developmental Education

LACs differ philosophically from both Learning Resource Centers (LRCs) and Developmental Education. Enright (1997) distinguishes: "the LAC is directed to helping students become successful learners while assuming modes of instruction will remain relatively constant. On the other hand, the LRC is dedicated to providing innovative instructional delivery systems" (p. 3). LRCs primarily provide instruction and learning resource-related "things" to assist with learning – updated academic computer centers, library literacy, distance education, electronic access to remote resources, multimedia audio cassettes, radio, and videos, and other uses of advanced technology and audio-visual equipment to aid in instructional goals (Fradkin & Hisle, 1993). On the other hand, LACs use such methods as collaborative groups, computer technology, and collective learning providing such services as content tutoring, workshops, advising, and supplemental instruction (Enright, 1997). The LRC is likely to fall under the Dean of Library Services, while the Dean of Counseling or Student Services directs the LAC.

Developmental Education, with its emphasis on teaching basic skills and helping students become more competent learners, focuses on particular preparatory classes, tutoring, and other support as preparation for college-level coursework. Developmental programs typically target specific skill areas – reading, writing, and mathematics – with the intent of assessing proficiency before students move to a more rigorous curriculum. LAC goals are similar; however, LAC staff favor voluntary enrollment into basic skills courses and place less emphasis on assessment tests. LAC advocates are less insistent that students must pass through a specific set of requirements before moving on. Their role is to enable educational success by improving learning outcomes of students at all levels (Kerstiens, 1997). The centers themselves provide comprehensive services that are connected with the whole campus system.

Functions of a Learning Assistance Center

Based on a review of the literature, Martha Maxwell (1997) identified fourteen main services or functions LACs deliver:

- Academic evaluation/diagnostic testing for learning difficulties
- Programs (workshops, counseling, and courses) to improve study skills and learning strategies
- Peer tutoring and/or professional tutoring (appointments, drop-in, and online services)
- Supplemental instruction (course-related, highly structured group tutoring in which one student is trained to be the leader and meets with groups to model successful study strategies; may be offered for extra academic credit)
- Computer assisted instruction (interactive software for basic skills courses, study skills, critical thinking, and ESL students)
- Developmental/remedial courses (ranging from those who need some review to those who need a more intensively structured program; colleges are finding that connecting previously stand-alone developmental courses with a comprehensive LAC integrates services and provides more support to students with typically high drop-out rates)
- Faculty outreach services (engaging faculty in promoting and incorporating services and providing support materials as well as helping faculty incorporate study skills into their classes)
- Publicity and public relations (ongoing information services;

increasing contact with faculty)

- Contact with college administrators about services and program needs
- Ongoing staff development and staff/program certification (this can be done under the National Association for Developmental Education guidelines)
- Referral services (often made even more accessible through a web site)
- Counseling (links to personal, financial, educational, and career counseling)
- Advising (professional and peer)
- Evaluation (student questionnaires of services, keeping accurate records, alumni surveys; follow up studies on grade point averages and transfer/graduation rates)

In order to carry out these functions, LACs must coordinate with existing campus services (i.e. counseling, financial aid, etc.) to reflect the mission and goals of the institution. Large campuses may have different departments to carry out particular functions, while smaller campuses may have one centralized space. Creating an environment of assistance on campus is as crucial as providing assistance; it is what encourages students to not only seek out services, but to feel as though they are receiving support from the campus as well.

Community College Students: Offering a "Sense of Place"

According to Enright (1997), the "sense of place" created by LACs, which enables students to learn with greater ease and self-confidence, is fundamental to the success of LACs: "...the territory or real estate itself is central to the LAC concept...it is the place and the ecology that distinguishes the LAC from the isolated reading improvement class, the study skills seminar, the summer orientation, and the tutorial session" (p.2). LACs create a "learner-centered environment" for students that allows them to find their place on campus, a component long acknowledged as having a significant effect on one's learning outcomes (Silverman and Cassazza, 2000).

At community colleges the LAC client is likely to be nontraditional. This student is more likely to be older, a first generation college attendee, single or married with children, an adult woman, foreign born or a full-time employee. This student is less likely to feel at home in the academy and does not usually feel the same sense of "belonging" as students on four-year campuses (Enright, 1997). Consequently, these students sometimes may not find adequate support for themselves on campus, especially their "sense of place". Ultimately, this may contribute to their "stopping out" of higher education.

From various student development studies (including Astin, 1993), students who are affiliated with a campus organization, a particular on-campus job, or an instructor are more likely to feel connected and remain in school. For Enright (1997), having an actual locale to go to on campus, at which one can find effective support as well as scholastic assistance, enables students to realize a place of their own, their personal "sense of place." This important relationship to the institution, however formal or informal, boosts retention. Enright proclaims, "The learning center is the nontraditional students' place." Thus, at the community college, the LAC can be a physical place for a student to not only receive the academic assistance required to succeed in college-level courses, but the "sense of place" needed by students who may not feel comfortable in the realm of academia.

The recent trend in postsecondary education of becoming more "learning-centered" (Silverman & Cassazza, 2000) supports the importance of LACs and the many services they provide. The LACs' campus-wide approach to learning assistance for all students advances a comprehensive student learning environment.

Additional Resources

To support learning assistance professionals, the National College Learning Center Association provides resources regarding tutoring, grants, conferences, and a summer institute on its website.
www.eiu.edu/~lrnasst/nclca/index.html

The College Reading and Learning Association offers a monograph for practitioners entitled "Starting a Learning Assistance Center".
www.crla.net/newstuff/ordermonograph.html

For a list of LAC websites by state and college see http://www.pvc.maricopa.edu/%7Elsche/resources/websitedir/states.html or http://www.crla.net/lacm_states.htm.

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